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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper, the fourth in a series of five dealing with communication reticence, describes the residual effects of training in a treatment program for communicationally reticent individuals. A questionnaire to assess the specific problems which led students to seek instruction in the special speech sections of the Pennsylvania State University, and to gauge recall of basic skills (goal analysis, audience analysis and structuring) taught in the course was designed. According to the 154 sets of responses received, a high percentage (64%) of students detailed both immediate and continuing influence from instruction in the program. Suggestions for further study in methods and effects of instruction are included. (KS)

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CONTINUING EFFECTS OF A RHETORICAL METHOD OF INSTRUCTION FOR RETICENT STUDENTS[1]

by Susan K. Oerkvitz*

The nature of reticence, the instructional procedures followed in a special program for reticent students at The Pennsylvania State University, and the effects of that instruction on a small, intensively studied group of students have been explored in preceding articles in this issue. A further question remains: what residual effects of training in the reticence program (hereafter, the "special sections") would be reported by former members of classes taught according to a common syllabus by different teachers over a longer period of time? A study designed to answer this question was necessarily limited, since there was no available baseline measure of either pre-course or post-course behavior for the majority of students who have studied in special sections. Therefore investigation centered on garnering students' reports of their perceptions of residual effects of training in the special sections on their own communicative attitudes and behaviors.

Methodology

Having taught in the Penn State reticence program and being familiar with the course objective and procedures, the author designed a questionnaire with open-ended and two-choice items asking:

1. the specific problems which led students to seek instruction in the special sections;
2. whether students recalled basic skills (goal analysis, audience analysis, structuring) taught in the course;

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3. whether students used those skills in communication situations encountered subsequent to instruction, and if so, in which situations skills were used;

4. what proportion of students felt they had improved as communicators at the close of instruction as a direct consequence of the course, and the reasons for that judgment;

5. what reasons were offered by those who did not feel that they had improved at the close of instruction;

6. what continuing (as distinguished from immediate) effects of instruction former students perceived; and

7. suggestions for modifications in course practices, given the students' perceptions of the utility and effects of instruction in their subsequent experiences.

Following a pilot study, a revised questionnaire was mailed to 347 participants enrolled in special sections at Penn State from Fall Term 1972 (when the current standardized course syllabus was adopted) through Spring Term 1974. Forty-six percent of the questionnaires which apparantly reached their destinations were returned, providing data on the experiences of 154 people.

A series of analysis categories was derived from key ideas which recurred across respondents' replies. Each response was recorded under a category head which represented the ideas expressed, the number of responses per category was summed, and response totals were scanned for trends.

Results

Respondents provided a multitude of reasons for participation in special sections, but the bulk of reported difficulties concerned public speaking, interpersonal communication, and class participation. Problems in public speaking were most frequently given as impetus for entering the special sections; about 58 percent of the respondents reported such

difficulties. Just over half of the respondents reported difficulty in interpersonal situations (e.g., talking with strangers, professors and other authority figures, participating in groups, conversing with friends and peers). Twenty-five people elected the special sections because they were uncomfortable volunteering opinions, asking questions, or answering out loud in classroom situations. Eleven felt that physical and/or emtional problems (blushing, shaking sweating, "blanking out" of thoughts) would hamper them in regular classes. Others mentioned lack of "confidence," dissatisfaction with voice, pitch, rate, articulation, fear of interviewing, or lack of fluency in English because of foreign backgrounds. A few admitted to no special difficulties other than wanting to avoid the regular basic speech course.

A variety of post-class communication situations were reported, with the largest number (241) of responses falling into categories under interpersonal communication. The second most common class of situations respondents encountered involved public speaking; 96 individuals had reported information to classmates or to business groups, were involved in teaching, or had spoken to people at social functions or at meetings of community or religious organizations. Involvements in business contacts, class participation activities, interview situations, and (somewhat surprisingly) telephone conversations were also mentioned.

Fifty to eighty percent of the new respondents reported recall of skills learned in class, the percentage varying according to the skill in question. Recall of audience analysis techniques was most frequently cited, followed by recall of goal analysis procedures; between 75 and 80 percent of the respondents remembered these skills. Recall of structuring was much less frequently mentioned, perhaps because the term "structuring"

may be used loosely (in a way that the term "goal analysis" is not) to refer to different steps in preparing for communication. The generality of the term may have made it difficult for some to clearly understand what the term encompasses, much less to remember the skills involved, in the absence of any written material on the subject at the time.

Approximately 80 percent of the respondents said they had used one or more of the skills in one or more post-class situations. Use of audience analysis was most often mentioned in relation to interpersonal, public speaking, and business contacts. Use of goal analysis was most frequently mentioned in connection with interview situations and telephone conversations. Use of structuring was most frequently mentioned only in relation to class participation situations and/or preparation of written homework assignments.

Three-quarters of the respondents reported that they had improved as communicators at the close of the course. Elaborating on reasons for that judgment, respondents provided 206 responses, almost 70 percent of which revolved around one or more of three themes. First, a large number of respondents said they had greater "confidence" in themselves (but often did not develop that idea further). Second, they mentioned feeling a sense of accomplishment or increased experience in handling various communication situations (e.g., they knew that as a result of course experiences they could handle demands made by situations which had previously troubled them). Third, they often judged themselves improved because they had learned specific skills in communication.

About twenty respondents mentioned cognitive gains--changes in their perspectives on themselves and/or on others as communicators and as people in relationship to other not-so-threatening human beings.

To these respondents others now appear to be less than perfect communicators and to be interested in the things that even less facile communicators have to share. Six respondents said that the course had provided a basis for grappling with other personal problems, not necessarily communication-specific, such as facing the need for therapy, dealing with students at different grade levels, or organizing one's thoughts.

Those who felt they had not improved at the end of the course most often supported that judgment with mention of continuing difficulties in public speaking. They still expressed anxiety about it, or felt they hadn't improved sufficiently because of lack of classroom practice. Given that public speaking difficulties were most often cited as reasons for entering the course, this is an important finding.

64 percent of the respondents reported continued course influence from the course during the year or more that had elapsed between class enrollment and response to the questionnaire. Having communication skills was cited most often as a long-range benefit, followed by reports of the sense of increased accomplishment or experience and of increased "confidence." The same types of categories emerged from examination of both immediate benefits and continuing influence; although the numbers differed, the general proportion of responses per category was similar across the two questions. One new category (of continuing influence) emerged: four people indicated that Speech 200 had allowed them to challenge new frontiers, to attempt communication experiences they would not have dared otherwise. Such challenges included studying abroad, accepting a sales jobs, and getting involved in a peer counseling program.

Commenting on valuable aspects of instruction, respondents noted the value of classroom practice situations and exercises, particularly in

public speaking. They emphasized the value of skills training. They stressed the importance of the informal and supportive class atmosphere and emphasized their appreciation of small class size, willingness of instructors to provide individual assistance as needed, and the chance to relax and practice skills in the company of others with similar difficulties. Respondents' heaviest stress was placed on the chance for practice and more practice!

Respondents' suggestions for course modification were diverse, strikingly individualistic, difficult to classify, and too numerous to be reported verbatim. Among more common themes respondents stressed that the amount of time and practice devoted to public speaking should be maintained and/or increased from its present level. Ten suggested that the course be increased to cover two or more terms, and four more called for establishment of a voluntary "refresher option" for practice and further learning of skills. Respondents also recommended keeping sections and teacher/student ratios small and increasing the selectiveness of entry screening procedures to keep out malingerers as much as possible.

Conclusions

A high percentage (64%) of respondents detailed both immediate and continuing influence from instruction in the Penn State reticence program. One must be wary of the tendency to make sweeping generalizations about effects of instruction on reticent students per se; these conclusions are based solely on information from the 154 sets of responses received, and there is no presumption latent in the data about the attitudes of those who did not respond. However, the results of this study support Metzger's earlier positive findings and suggest other interesting trends and questions

that deserves further comment.

Respondents' replies did not suggest a functional relationship between the nature of a student's presenting communication difficulties and his subsequent judgment of immediate and/or continued effects of instruction. They do suggest that students who enter with public speaking difficulties which are not sufficiently ameliorated by course experiences will feel that the course did not benefit them enough. Since the data indicates that they may well face subsequent public speaking demands, there is reason for their concern. (Recall that 96 respondents (62%) reported subsequent public speaking experience.

Graduates of reticence sections have addressed sorority gatherings, chapter meetings of the National Association of Art Education, strangers gathered in national parks, a gathering of family members at a relative's wedding, inmates at a prison, and even the Toastmater's Club (where the person gave a talk on goal analysis!) The variety of situations requiring formal speaking which may be encountered by people once they leave the special sections suggests that need for a strong emphasis on public speaking skills and experience during the course, which provides the only formal speech instruction that many students will encounter.

Respondents who judged themselves improved as communicators generally reported course benefits extending beyond remediation of their presenting problems. As previously mentioned, the nature of course effects (either immediate or continuing) that led any single respondent to judge himself improved did not seem to bear any great relationship to the nature of the initial difficulties, nor could one predict what any individual had to say about continuing influences from his reports of immediate influence.

Not all respondents commented positively on the course and its effects; some considered it a waste of time, others disliked what seemed to be an artificial atmosphere in the practice sessions, and several expressed positive feelings about the course effects as a whole but offered negative reactions to isolated course incidents or practices. A number expressed general misgivings about their lack of improvement.

Recommended modifications in course practices include: keeping the classes small (no more than 20 students per class) to allow optimum interaction among students and between teacher and class; emphasizing instruction and practice skills and situations both inside and outside class, particularly in public speaking; grouping students in classes according to their specific difficulties if possible, so that teachers and students are afforded opportunities for more intensive preparation, presentation, and practice of situation-specific strategies; revising current screening procedure for course entry; providing referral opportunities to experts in psychological services or speech pathology as needed; adding the aforementioned refresher option; and stressing (on the teacher's part) the need for individual practice of skills OUTSIDE the speech classroom while the course is in progress and after it finishes.

In summary, instruction in the special sections reportedly provided opportunities which about 80 percent of the respondents used to develop personal insights and to gather skills and information for dealing with differing communication demands and responsibilities. Those skills and insights were reported to be of continuing benefit to approximately 64 percent of the respondents, who applied them in a variety of post-class experiences which frequently included and led beyond the problem-situations which had caused pre-class difficulties.

Suggestions for Further Study - A Call to Action

Reported effects of instruction over a one-year period differ from those cited as immediate post-course effects. What are the residual effects of instruction over an even longer period of time? What can be done to improve assessment procedures, based on data about effects that are currently available?

In an earlier article in this journal, Metzger notes the egocentrism which typically hampers a reticent person; she mentions that instruction aims to assist students' development of dual perspective. Comments from several respondents in this study suggest their progression through one or more stages toward development of greater dual perspective, as that instruction provided "a chance, perhaps a challenge, for students to re-examine themselves as communicators in the company of their not-so-perfect peers." What relationships may obtain between reticent behavior, egocentrism, and/or effects of instruction? Might the degree of egocentrism a person reports and/or exhibits in communication situations provide a basis for development of a usable diagnostic of reticence?

What effects do various teaching styles have on students' improvement? The present study dealt only with questions of method; it would be useful to know what strategies or response styles teachers of reticent students might employ to increase their possible impact as change agents.

Thought, time, and research spent on considering alternative (or improved pedagogical) methods of assisting students such as those who reported no benefit from the present program may pay off in improvement of the current mode of instruction and enrichment of even more students' skills. It is not yet time to rest on our laurels.

Finally, there is need for studies which detail both methods and

effects of instruction in other basic speech courses both at Penn State and at other colleges and universities. A great gap exists in present speech literature such that the results of this study stand nearly alone (with the exception of Metzger's work) as an indication of what the continuing effects of a given program of speech instruction are. Research on the effects of instruction is difficult to design unless the method of instruction has been carefully detailed. It can be time-consuming, from both researchers' and subjects' points of view. It requires patience, organization, and advance planning. However, only in the light of such research will the results of this study become significant in any relative sense. It is high time that others begin to investigate the effects of different methods of speech instruction on both reticent and nonreticent people.

FOOTNOTES

1. The author's thesis forms the basis of this article. The reader will find complete accounts of methodology and results in Susan K. Oerkvitz, "Reports of Continuing Effects of Instruction in a Specially Designed Speech Course for Reticent Students" (unpublished Master's thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 1975).